

TESTIMONY

TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

IMPROVING AND REFORMING OUR NATION'S SURFACE
TRANSPORTATION PROGRAMS: CENTRAL FLORIDA FIELD HEARING

BY COUNTY CHAIR FRANK BRUNO
VOLUSIA COUNTY FLORIDA

9:30 AM
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MAITLAND CIVIC CENTER
641 SOUTH MAITLAND AVENUE
MAITLAND, FL 32751

Field Hearing before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Written Testimony of Volusia County Chair Frank Bruno

March 14, 2011

Thank you Chairman Mica, Ranking Member Rahall, and members of this committee for the opportunity to provide testimony at this field hearing on "Improving and Reforming Our Nation's Surface Transportation Programs."

I represent Volusia County, Florida, which is framed by the Greater Daytona Beach area and 46 miles of beaches on the east and the St. Johns River and the outskirts of Orlando on the west. The County has a population of approximately 500,000 and encompasses 16 cities within a geographical area the size of Rhode Island.

The national recession that has hit hard across America has not spared Volusia County. It must be remembered that these national difficulties are all the more evident here at the local government level, where we have seen businesses large and small close. Tourism, a major part of Volusia's economy, has declined. Many of our residents lost their jobs or had work hours reduced. Property values have plummeted.

All of this means a deficiency in tax revenue at a time when those of us in government are experiencing an ever greater demand for our services.

Most succinctly, America and its local governments need a new course of action and a new way of coping with budget shortfalls while continuing to provide the services our citizens depend upon.

Through responsible spending, careful decision-making and community partnerships, Volusia County has continued to move forward with solving its infrastructure needs amid a backdrop of economic turmoil.

How have we accomplished this in the middle of the most difficult economic conditions our nation has experienced in more than 70 years? Similar to the goals of this Congress, it did not start with more spending.

Although we have been downsizing steadily for the last few years, in 2010, we really amplified these efforts. During a series of 30 budget workshops held at each Council meeting last year, we trimmed \$24 million in property taxes from the general fund budget and \$32 million from all property taxes for the fiscal year that began October 1st. We revisited every single budget item, and analyzed the performance of each County department. We worked hard to avoid County employee layoffs, because this would have only deepened the recession in our area and inflicted unnecessary pain on our communities. But, we have still managed to reduce our work force during the last three years by a total of 467 positions, mostly through attrition.

Innovative thinking and strategic partnerships have been the key to our success.

As relevant to this committee's jurisdiction, I will tell you how we have adapted this model of partnerships to solving regionally based transportation infrastructure needs.

You can see from the following examples how we have been able to move ahead on projects that otherwise would have been delayed many years because of a lack of funding. Allow me to briefly highlight five projects that best illustrate our strategy of success.

First, through a cost sharing venture with the City of Port Orange and the State Department of Transportation last August, we were able to four-lane South Williamson Boulevard from Spruce Creek south, completing the second phase of this project. This \$11.8 million road-widening project was good news to local drivers, as the volume of traffic along this stretch of Williamson has nearly doubled since 2000. As everyone here knows, increases in infrastructure needs do not always decrease in tough economic times.

Secondly, we have been working on a \$10.3 million extension of Dunn Avenue from Tomoka Farms Road to Williamson Boulevard over Interstate 95. This is another project we are advancing through cooperative partnerships. It is unique because of the federal, state, county, city and private participants who contributed funding to advance the construction by more than 10 years. The funding breakdown was 79% federal, 5% state and 16% local. This will be a major overpass connecting northern Daytona Beach to the developing areas west of I-95. We anticipate this extension will allow residential and business development, providing a much needed economic boost to the area.

Another funding partnership, this one in the City of Daytona Beach Shores, has resulted in the upgrade of the existing traffic signals at the major traffic intersection of Dunlawton Avenue and State Road A1A/South Atlantic Avenue. The upgrade included replacing the existing concrete pole and wire-supported traffic signals with more wind resistant and aesthetically pleasing mast arm-supported signals. This \$300,000 city-led project was funded by equal contributions from the city, county and Florida Department of Transportation.

A fourth example of forward looking partnerships is our decision to finance the Central Florida Commuter Rail system. The construction of stations and lines along this 61-mile planned route linking DeLand and downtown Orlando to Osceola County is a pure investment in our future. The completed project will take thousands of cars off the highways, create more than 13,000 new jobs statewide and provide cost effective transportation to our citizens by 2013.

This project is a partnership effort between Volusia, Seminole, Orange and Osceola counties, as well as the City of Orlando and the state and federal governments. Our partnerships are evident as demonstrated by seventy (70) Resolutions of Support offered by individuals, organizations, associations and various levels of government. Each is essential; but not one is sufficient, they are all equally important when it comes to building a regional coalition of support for a "Stronger Florida" through SunRail.

Lastly, Volusia County recognizes the importance of providing pedestrian and bicycle facilities as a means of expanding the transportation opportunities for residents who, either by choice or by circumstance, do not use an automobile. Volusia County supports the intent of Federal Transportation Authorization Legislation with respect to creating an integrated, intermodal transportation system which provides travelers with a choice of transportation modes while reducing the demand and maintenance of the highway and local road systems.

The Volusia ECHO program, a voter-approved tax designed to enhance environmental, cultural, historic and outdoor recreational activities has augmented the County's trail program to the tune of \$1 million annually. Construction has started on a 5.7 mile segment of the East Central Regional Rail Trail. This \$1.8 million project uses ECHO funds paired with a federal grant, and will help our trail system grow to an expected 27 miles by the end of this year.

What has become increasingly evident to me, and what I want to convey to you, is how our County government has continued to strengthen our relationships with locally-based community partners, non-profit agencies, and businesses. Make no mistake that while this economy has presented significant challenges, it has also provided the County and its cities with many opportunities to help each other and learn from each other as we work together to serve our citizens.

With regard to Federal matters and how they relate to localities such as Volusia, let me talk briefly about the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*, which we found extremely challenging to execute and implement at our level. Among the challenges we faced was the efficient delivery of projects. Since 2008, the Florida Association of County Engineers and Road Superintendents (FACERS) and the National Association of County Engineers (NACE) have worked towards streamlining the Federal Aid Program for projects by Local Public Agencies (LPA). These projects, for the most part, involve low dollar enhancement type projects such as pathways, intersection improvements and landscaping. Locals also have done larger road and bridge projects under this program, but the main issue for us involves having to meet the entire gamut of federal regulations – for projects that may cost as little as \$50,000. In such a delicate climate of recovery, such additional challenges can become very real problems for municipalities like us.

In April 2009, NACE developed and released the *Federal-Aid Process Streamlining Issue Paper* and adopted a policy to “develop and advocate legislative language changes to the next Transportation authorization bill to improve the efficiency of implementation of the federal-aid program by local government.” We believe that just as the Federal Government needs to push-down the execution of projects to the States and local agencies, there is a level of local projects that should be further delegated and exempted from State management to reduce redundant oversight and increase flexibility and efficiency.

I have included this Issue Paper and findings with my “Statement for the Record.”

Based on our experiences, Volusia County strongly believes the 112th Congress and the *House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee* specifically has an opportunity to create a more flexible framework for State and public agencies to accomplish needed transportation improvements.

Streamlining the project approval and fundraising process for transportation infrastructure projects will save costs and stretch the limited funding environment. We would like to see the Transportation Reauthorization Bill create legislative support and incentives for public private partnerships such as the ones we have experienced in Central Florida. I believe there also is opportunity to develop a more holistic approach to defining regional projects that will consolidate individual segments and allow maximum flexibility to apply project savings as they are created. Similarly, there are opportunities to create an exemption level for smaller projects that do not require Federal or even State oversight to streamline their implementation process and save on overall costs.

Many of these ideas have already been discussed at the local and State level, and I offer supporting documentation to be entered into the Record as part of my Statement.

Finally, I want to express my thanks to Chairman Mica for his interest and commitment to creating jobs and helping America build its transportation infrastructure. Your passion and leadership on these issues is just what America needs. We think that a recovery strategy based on innovative, regionally-based approaches and partnerships is just what America needs most. We believe that such an approach would be transformative to solving the problems of our nation in a timely and ultimately fiscally- efficient manner. We hope that this Congress can work towards developing such a plan this year. I look forward to working with you both and your respective committees and am available to assist in any way that is helpful.

ATTACHMENTS:

- 1. Letter. Florida Association of County Engineers and Road Superintendents, Dated February 3, 2011; Chairman John Mica**
- 2. Accelerating the Project Delivery Process: Eliminating Bureaucratic Red Tape And Making Every Dollar Count; Statement of John Davis Chief Engineer Jacksonville Transportation Authority, Jacksonville, FL For the American Public Works Association**